UDC 32.019.5
DOI: 10.5937/spm96-64201
Original research article

Српска политичка мисао
(Serbian Political Thought)
No 2/2026.
Vol. 96
pp. 55-74

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CRITICAL REVIEW OF SOPHISTIC MODELS OF PERSUASION REGARDING THEIR SIGNIFICANCE AND INFLUENCE ON MODERN POLITICAL RHETORIC[***]

Abstract

Sophists were professional teachers of primarily rhetoric who imparted their knowledge to young men in the Greek world. They were active in the fifth century BC, and their influence, above all on rhetoric, was enormous both on later centuries and classical Greek authors, and up to the present day. This is especially reflected in political rhetoric, which is based on persuasion, i.e., convincing listeners by using various rhetorical techniques, the foundations of which were laid by the sophists. It is a common opinion that democratic campaigns should be based on rational argumentation based on the truth, but in practice, this is not the case, and they are more often based on opinion and not necessarily on truth. The basis of doxastic argumentation was laid by the sophists. This paper will analyze certain attitudes of the sophists as well as fragments of their works that indicate that their thought is still present in the political space,

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[***] This paper was written within the research activity of the Institute for Political Studies, funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

using and analyzing the best examples from the most famous sophistic representatives, namely Protagoras and Gorgias. Some of their principles are implemented in modern political campaigns in democratic systems, which reproduce the structural models of persuasion developed by the sophists, where the emphasis was on performance, the impression that was left and effective presentation.

Keywords: sophists, rhetoric, persuasion, political rhetoric, Protagoras, Gorgias, sophistic argumentation

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This paper examines the rhetorical corpus of the sophists, with particular emphasis on Protagoras and Gorgias, in order to analyze classical rhetoric within the sophistic tradition. Central to this analysis is the relativistic epistemology encapsulated in the proposition that "man is the measure of all things," which privileges subjective interpretation as contingent upon specific contextual circumstances. In this respect, sophistic rhetoric exhibits notable affinities with later theoretical frameworks such as constructivism and pragmatism, while simultaneously functioning as an early model of persuasive practice within democratic settings. The primary objective of the paper is to compare sophistic rhetoric with contemporary political rhetoric, drawing on theoretical approaches from political communication. The analysis seeks to identify structural and functional continuities between these two rhetorics.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in comparative rhetorical analysis. It systematically examines key rhetorical elements in sophistic texts alongside those found in modern political communication. Given the limited availability of primary sophistic sources, the analysis relies predominantly on secondary literature, including historical and philosophical scholarship, supplemented by relevant contemporary academic studies. Key concepts, such as kairotic persuasion, doxastic persuasion, and sophistic argumentation, are defined and critically discussed within this framework. Through a comparative approach, the paper identifies recurring rhetorical patterns and evaluates their persistence in contemporary political discourse. In doing so, it demonstrates the

continuity of sophistic rhetorical principles and their enduring influence on modern practices of political rhetoric.

In order to contextualize this analytical framework, it is necessary to look into basic historical background and the conceptual characteristics of sophistic rhetoric. To understand sophistic rhetoric, it is necessary first to clarify who the sophists were and why their reputation became so contested in antiquity. Although today the word sophist still has somewhat pejorative meaning, initially, as Diogenes Laërtius writes, it had a positive connotation, since the words *σοφός* and *σοφιστής* were used in the same meaning, describing a wise person, and even Homer and Hesiod were called sophists by Cratinus (Diogenes Laertius 1925a, 13–15). The sophists gained a bad reputation because they were considered to corrupt moral values since they questioned the existence of the gods, while putting man at the center, and in addition they charged for their services. On the other hand, Giorgini notes that the sophists did not question the traditional values of Greek society, but rather successfully worked in accordance with them, since they also held political offices, apart from teaching (Giorgini 2016, 14). Therefore, it was necessary for them to behave in accordance with existing standards in order to maintain the social status that brought them material benefits. Of course, it is difficult today to conclude what is entirely true since most of the information we learn about the sophists comes from secondary sources, and very few of the works of the sophists themselves have survived. Therefore, it should be assumed that the truth is somewhere in the middle; there were those who advocated controversial opinions at the time and questioned the existing order and value system, while others worked in accordance with them. Plato, who is the biggest critic of sophists, Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Isocrates, who wrote the famous work *Against the Sophists*, contributed the most to negative attitudes about them. Thus, the character of the stranger in the *Sophist* describes the sophist as a hunter who hunts people in exchange for money, and in return gives something like education, which he calls sophistry (Plato 1961, 289). At the end, Plato concludes that the sophist is an imitator of the wise, so his name is a variation of the word of that root (*σοφός*-wise).

This critical portrayal is closely tied to ancient debates about rhetoric and persuasion, which were central to sophistic practice. In Plato's Gorgias, rhetorical skill is described as the power of persuasion in court, in council, in assembly, or in any other type of gathering (Plato 1979, 19). Thus, it is almost common to see rhetoric, especially sophistic

rhetoric, as persuasion that must reach the souls of the audience. Gagarin, on the other hand, believes that influencing the opinions and attitudes of the audience was only one of the goals of sophistic logoi (Gagarin 2001, 277). He maintains that it was more important for the sophists to shock or tell the truth or please the audience than to convince them, which means that persuasion is one of the secondary goals, and more important than: "the serious exploration of issues and forms of argument, the display of ingenuity in thought, argument and style of expression, and the desire to dazzle, shock and please" (Gagarin 2001, 289). Whether one takes this position, that this is not the exclusive goal of sophistic rhetoric, or whether one believes that it is the main one, it is certain that persuasion played a major role among the sophists. I am of the opinion that persuasion was more important than the effects and goals that Gagarin cites, since they are short-term and easier to achieve, and also lead to persuasion, and therefore serve more as a means to achieve the goal.

As Bitzer notes, rhetoric is a way of changing reality by creating speech, which changes reality through thought and action (Bitzer 1968, 4). Similarly, Isocrates said that rhetoric is "the worker of persuasion" (Quintilian 1963, 303). Poulakos explains that it is important to distinguish rhetoric from knowledge (to episteme), since the goal of rhetoric is not to gain cognitive certainty, nor the confirmation of logic, but rather it is in a domain outside of logic and deals with what is possible and is receptive to the fluidity of contingent conditions (Poulakos 1983, 37). We can interpret this as if reality first changes verbally, then it is necessary for the wider masses to believe in what has been said, which leads to action, and finally, reality changes in the practical physical world as well, not only verbally. This is why the persuasive character of rhetoric is crucial, and the sophists, being the first to apply it in its full sense, are responsible for the development of political persuasion and political rhetoric to this day.

This general understanding of rhetoric as a force that operates through belief and action helps clarify what distinguishes sophistic rhetoric from other rhetorical traditions. Kennedy believes that sophistry is largely a product of rhetoric, while rhetoric is an older and more vital art form (Kennedy 1963, 26). This is certainly true, but sophistic rhetoric has its own peculiarities. Sophistic rhetoric is characterized by its situational, contingent, and doxastic orientation: it prioritizes plausibility, timing (*καιρός*), and audience beliefs over demonstrable

truth. Sophists treated rhetoric as a practical techne aimed at success in civic disputes, emphasizing probability, verbal agility, and the strategic reversal of positions. By contrast, rhetoric about which Plato and Aristotle write sought to discipline persuasion through stable norms, truth-orientation, and systematic theory. This type of rhetoric integrates logical structures and ethical constraints, framing persuasion as an adjunct to philosophy rather than an autonomous practice grounded in opinion and circumstance.

KAIROTIC PERSUASION OR TIMING AS POWER

This situational and contingent orientation of sophistic rhetoric is most clearly expressed in the concept of kairos, which gives temporal precision to persuasion. Although the word rhetoric as a discipline appeared only after the age of the sophists, certainly what they practiced corresponds to rhetoric, which Poulakos says is a skill that captures opportune moments of what is appropriate in a certain time and tries to present what is possible, that is, to convince the audience of it. Therefore, he concludes that it is essential to approach the rhetoric of the sophists as an art, style, and personal expression in which a good moment (*καιρός*), suitable (*τὸ πρέπον*), and possible (*τὸ δυνατόν*) play an important role (Poulakos 1983, 36).

It was important for the sophists that the speech was delivered in a timely manner in relation to the situation to which it refers, and when creating a speech, it is necessary to take into account timeliness. Therefore, it is important to respect the principle called kairos (Poulakos 1983, 39). If rhetoric functions by shaping belief at decisive moments, then timing becomes one of its main sources of power. Persuasion is most effective if applied at the right moment, so time is power for the sophist. Because of this, truth comes second to situational benefit. Giorgini states that sophists like Protagoras presented themselves as teachers of the art of life, and they taught their students primarily how to deal with circumstances, by reacting in a timely manner (*καιρός*) and answering practical needs (*τὰ δέοντα*) (Giorgini 2016, 13).

The fact that the sophists took into account kairos, that is, timeliness and appropriateness, shows that their speeches also had formal characteristics. They were not created ex tempore, that is, spontaneously, although they could sometimes seem so. This shows us that they paid great attention to the form of the speech, and that every word was said

intentionally and with a reason, just as political speeches are mostly created today for various purposes, especially when it comes to election campaigns. Therefore, what is said by the sophists had to be appropriate considering the time, the occasion, and the audience (Poulakos 1983, 42).

Sophists like Gorgias believed that things that are possible (probable) deserve more respect than those that are true. That is why the word logos has power, since it can create such possibilities. Isocrates also emphasizes the importance of kairos, either when describing current events or when using the past. Dionysius of Halicarnassus also tells us that Gorgias was the first to mention kairos, and we have proof of this in Diogenes Laertius when he talks about Protagoras' use of kairos. Kerferd emphasizes that these doctrines of probable or plausible, as well as the importance of timeliness and opinion, point to elements of the theory of rhetoric that have a lot of similarities with today's advertising and marketing techniques, whose originators are sophists (Kerferd 1981, 82). Therefore, advertising techniques are not only valid in marketing and for purely commercial purposes, but also in political marketing, which is most visible in democratic societies during elections.

In today's context, this is particularly visible during situations of political crises in which the media, the main mediators of political thought, play a significant role in persuasion, and taking advantage of the moment is of the utmost importance. Timely framing of events is particularly important, for example when it comes to scandals, security threats, economic instability, and state of war, in which political power depends on timeliness.

Sophistic rhetoric can also be understood as a form of agonistic persuasion, grounded in the conception of politics as contest (this agonistic element is not a characteristic of Greek politics alone, but of the entire Greek culture, including the theater with its protagonists and sports competitions). Rather than aiming at consensus or the discovery of objective truth, sophistic rhetoric emphasizes strategic confrontation, verbal competition, and the capacity to prevail in public disputes. Political persuasion is inevitably based on competitiveness, and in democratic systems where there is political pluralism, in order to gain the voter base, it is necessary to stand out. Political debates, election campaigns, and political speech in general can be viewed as theaters of competition, and victory is achieved not necessarily by facts and truth, but by elevating oneself, humiliating one's opponents, and activating the audience.

Political persuasion is used not only to influence the audience, or voters, but also political opponents, who can be manipulated and portrayed in a negative light in front of the audience through the skillful use of political persuasion, and some of the techniques we find among sophists that are used today are: reversals, antithesis, and appeals to plausibility. Therefore, we can conclude that political success depends more on execution and adaptation to the situation, or an appropriate and timely reaction, than on the truthfulness of the argument and its logic.

In contemporary politics, this agonistic aspect is highly visible. Electoral debates, media soundbites, and social media exchanges reward rhetorical agility, conflict framing, and symbolic victories over opponents. Political actors frequently prioritize scoring points, delegitimizing rivals, and mobilizing supporters rather than presenting the truth to voters and the general public. In this sense, modern political communication reproduces a distinctly sophistic logic, where persuasion is inseparable from competition and politics is staged as an ongoing rhetorical struggle.

DOXASTIC PERSUASION OR OPINION OVER TRUTH

The changes that occurred in the second half of the fifth century BC were of fundamental importance for society, since this period marked the beginning of a time when what people thought and said began to matter more than what was actually done. Kerferd notes that this led to a doctrine of the negation of truth and facts, where there are only ideologies and conceptual models, and the choice of which to adhere to is up to the authors (Kerferd 1981, 78).

This shift in social priorities had significant epistemological consequences, particularly regarding how truth itself was understood. The emphasis is placed on opinion, not on truth, or on what is possible, and not on what has been proven, since according to the sophistic doctrine, truth is individual, or can be observed in such a way that each person sees the truth in a different way, and therefore it is difficult to prove it. The form of "wisdom" thought by the sophist may be understood as an integrated combination of practical and political competence with proficiency in the persuasive use of language. The ontological and epistemological skepticism characteristic of some of the sophists gave rise to a conception of political expertise grounded in opportunism,

rhetorical "play," and the dominance of doxa within the collective life (Johnstone 2006, 267).

This orientation toward opinion rather than truth also shaped how sophistic practice was perceived, both in antiquity and in modern scholarship. Even today, certain authors believe that with their provocative arguments, which could also be paradoxical, the sophists tried to get the audience's attention in the first place, and not to teach them, that is, to show the truth (Gagarin and Woodruff 2008, 367). This interpretation, however, echoes an ancient understanding of sophistic practice as rooted in practical political skill rather than philosophical instruction. When describing his teacher Mnesiphilus the Phrearrhian in Themistocles' biography, Plutarch says that he was: "[…] a cultivator of what was then called 'sophia' or wisdom, although it was really nothing more than cleverness in politics and practical sagacity. Mnesiphilus received this 'sophia,' and handed it down, as though it were the doctrine of a sect, in unbroken tradition from Solon. His successors blended it with forensic arts, and shifted its application from public affairs to language, and were dubbed 'sophists'" (Plutarch 1968, 7).

These general characterizations are best understood through the doctrines of individual sophists. It is considered that Protagoras transformed the existing practice into intellectual exercises and the theoretical assumption that the truth is actually the most convincing argument, which does not necessarily have to be true or just, while Gorgias concluded that we must rely precisely on persuasion if we cannot reach the truth (Giorgini 2016, 25). Sextus in *Against the Schoolmasters* says following about Protagoras: "Some also reckoned Protagoras of Abdera in the company of those philosophers who do away with the standard of judgment, since he says that all appearances and opinions are true and that truth is a relative matter because a man's every perception or opinion immediately exists in relation to him. At any rate, he begins the Refutations with the following pronouncement: 'Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not'" (Sprague 2001, 18). Similarly, Gorgias says in the Encomium of Helen: "Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity […] that on most subjects most men take opinion as counselor to their soul, but since opinion is slippery and insecure it casts those employing it into slippery and insecure successes" (Sprague 2001, 52). He who

speaks, together with persuasion, can shape the soul however it wishes. To understand this power, he points to three examples of astronomers, who substitute opinion for opinion making incredible seem true, then he uses the example of legal debates where skillful speech overcomes the truth, and thirdly, philosophical disputes where opinion can be changed quickly through the swiftness of the thought (Sprague 2001, 52).

It is this triumph of opinion over truth that provoked philosophical criticism. Plato concludes that the sophist does not offer real knowledge, but only an opinion about things: "Then it is a sort of knowledge based upon mere opinion that the sophist has been shown to possess about all things, not true knowledge" (Plato 1961, 325). So the sophists base their argumentation on opinion, not on truth. Perhaps that is why it is so convincing because it is flexible and subject to imagination and has no limits, unlike argumentation based on facts. This is precisely one of the similarities with political rhetoric, which is often, as can be seen, not based on truth but on the possibilities and promises that the target audience wants to hear. Aristotle shares a similar opinion to Plato, and in his section *On Sophistical Refutations*, he says that the art practiced by sophists is actually an illusion of wisdom, which is out of touch with reality, and they make money on this apparent wisdom (Aristotle 1955, 11). He also calls sophistry that which appears to be philosophy, but which in fact is not (Aristotle 1933, 157).

Beyond epistemological questions, sophistic rhetoric also raised ethical and social concerns. It could be argued that sophists imposed or manipulated opinion, and sophistry can therefore be understood as deceiving and leading the audience to accept another opinion. Since the sophists began to teach how to speak, it can be understood that they limited critical thinking by using certain formulaic approaches and patterns, which leads us to tautology. McGee states that when individuals seem to think and act as a collective, they have in fact been misled, whether through manipulation or self-deception, into treating imagined constructs such as a "public mind," "public opinion," or a "public philosophy" as if they were real and given facts (McGee 1980, 2). It could be argued that sophisticated tactics could be used to actively impose and stabilize desired opinion through teachable rhetorical techniques. In this sense, persuasion risks becoming tautological: arguments circulate by repeatedly affirming what already "seems" commonly accepted, so that opinion is justified by opinion itself.

These changes also manifested in legal and political practice. Namely, the concept of truth was likewise questioned in judicial practice when logical reasoning replaced oaths and witnesses, and the real truth was not the end result of legal disputes, but what was the product of persuasion, which was the very essence of the dispute (Giorgini 2016, 17). If we look closely, we can see this preponderance of better, or more convincing, argumentation that does not necessarily have to be based on truth in political oratory, and therefore its practical consequences in the modern era. One of the best examples with the worst consequences is Hitler's policy, which, based on anti-Semitism rather than facts, managed to deceive the masses across Europe, leading to catastrophic consequences.

Now, in modern politics, and especially in campaigns, this is visible through the use of slogans, repetition, or repetition of certain phrases. This type of persuasion is also contributed by a performance that has dramatic elements, and leaves an emotional reaction in the audience, which is visible in most world leaders. By applying this type of model in which the emphasis is on opinion, the goal is to create a group or society that shares the same beliefs and opinions, and not to present facts. In creating such shared beliefs and values, slogans, simple narratives, and formulaic repeated expressions play an important role.

What counts as truth in politics is inseparable from belief. Its falsity is therefore rhetorical rather than epistemic: ideological claims appear true or false only insofar as persuasion succeeds in making certain normative commitments seem plausible (McGee 1980, 4). This understanding closely aligns with the sophistic model of doxastic persuasion. The sophists did not aim to establish timeless truths, but to shape what appears credible, reasonable, or acceptable to an audience at a given moment. Political "truth" emerges from opinion (*δόξα*), not from demonstration (*ἐπιστήμη*); ideology operates similarly as sophistic persuasion does because it produces the illusion of truth by rhetorically organizing beliefs, not by uncovering an objective reality beyond persuasion. McGee claims that political language is an ideology in practice, by means of which decisions are managed, and public change, apostasy, and behavior are controlled, and its characteristics are the vocabulary of ideographs and slogans (McGee 1980, 5).

If truth functions through what is said rather than what is proven, then persuasion necessarily relies on presumptions that precede and structure argument. A central difficulty in theorizing presumptions

concerns how they relate to evidence in argumentative contexts; presumptions often function as acceptable starting points in reasoning, even when they are not supported by evidence strong enough to establish their truth conclusively. From a strict logical perspective, this evidential insufficiency can make presumptions appear problematic or questionable (Walton 2009, 18). Suspicion, therefore, arises because, measured against logical standards of proof, presumptions seem weakly justified, even though they play a necessary and functional role in real-world reasoning and debate. So, the assumptions, that is, the possibilities, on which the double argumentation present in the sophists is based, are in collision with logic.

SOPHISTIC ARGUMENTATION

First criticism of the new approach began because of court cases where skilled orators managed to persuade people to believe anything, and later the criticism was transferred to the works of famous writers such as Euripides, believing that such techniques disregard wisdom (De Romilly 2002, 68). Gorgias is reported to have also authored a *Method of Argument* as well as two books of *Antilogies*. These works indicate that he instructed his students in the systematic practice of arguing both for and against a given position, as he was teaching them to alternate between praise and blame, between prosecution and defense. Such structured oppositional exercises are commonly described as the use of "double arguments" (De Romilly 2002, 76).

This method of counterargument flourished in the late fifth century, but soon disappeared; nevertheless, the teachings of the sophists were applied in an assimilated form and have survived to the present day (De Romilly 2002, 89–90). As we see from the fragments and secondary sources, Gorgias and Protagoras held that absolute truth cannot be known, and such an epistemology, Kennedy believes, is the product of rhetoric, which plays an essential role in the argument from probability. Such reasoning would be ruled out by a philosophy that claims scientific rigor and exactitude, since probabilistic arguments frequently allow for equally persuasive demonstrations of opposing conclusions (Kennedy 1963, 31).

The main argument used by the sophists was that of probability. For example, in the courts, the subject of debate was not truth but what seemed possible, and the sophists knew how to use this argument

systematically and subtly. They were also adept at employing this argument indirectly, turning an argument based on likelihood back on itself in order to produce the opposite conclusion (De Romilly 2002, 58). We see an example of such a case in Plato's *Phaedrus* when he describes the persuasive argument used by Tisias: In the event that a strong but cowardly man is robbed by a small and weak thief, in court both the accused and the accused must lie; the accused because he is ashamed of the situation, and the thief can use the argument that he could not have done it because he is so weak. In this way, the truth is completely bypassed (Plato 1982, 557–558).

About double argumentation, which was also used by Protagoras Diogenes Laertius begins his account of the famous sophist's teachings by saying: "Protagoras was the first to maintain that there are two sides to every question, opposed to each other, and he even argued in this fashion, being the first to do so. Furthermore, he began a work thus: 'Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not'" (Diogenes Laertius 1925b, 463–464). So the success of the argument did not depend on whether the argument was correct, true, and supported by facts, but on how well it was presented, and how convincing the performance was thanks to all the rhetorical techniques that the sophists used. However, we should keep in mind that the model of double argumentation is not a novelty, but what is new, and what the sophists introduced is that one and the same speaker expresses opposing arguments within one complex argument (Kerfed 1981, 84).

There are interpretations that Protagoras, when he spoke of making a weaker argument stronger, had the technique of argument reversal in mind, by which incriminating circumstances are reframed as grounds for justification, and advantageous conditions are transformed into elements of reproach (De Romilly 2002, 78–79). This new approach, introduced by the sophists, that the same thing could be defended from two different points of view, brought into question the truth, which no longer played any role, and everything could be proven or denied. For this reason, this type of argumentation was called sophistry, and thus, success gained more importance instead of truth (De Romilly 2002, 82). However, the note introduces critical reinterpretation: in practice, this method no longer preserves a genuine balance between thesis and antithesis. Instead, there is only a thesis that absorbs and distorts its opposite. What appears as a confrontation of arguments becomes

a technique for reshaping opposition into a weakened or "corrupted" version that ultimately reinforces the original position. Thus, sophistic argumentation worked as a strategy that transforms disagreement into rhetorical dominance rather than true dialectical resolution.

Aristotle also speaks about this type of sophistic argument in *Rhetoric*, saying: "For if a man is not likely to be guilty of what he is accused of, for instance if, being weak, he is accused of assault and battery, his defence will be that the crime is not probable; but if he is likely to be guilty, for instance, if he is strong, it may be argued again that the crime is not probable, for the very reason that it was bound to appear so […] Here, both the alternatives appear equally probable, but the one is really so, the other not probable absolutely, but only in the conditions mentioned. And this is what 'making the worse appear the better argument'? means. Wherefore men were justly disgusted with the promise of Protagoras; for it is a lie, not a real but an apparent probability, not found in any art except Rhetoric and Sophistic" (Aristotle 1926, 335). It shows how misleading arguments can seem valid by shifting perspectives. A claim may first be treated as true in general, and then as true only in a specific case, which creates confusion. In dialectics, this happens when wordplay makes something seem knowable or true by redefining it. In rhetoric, the same trick produces a persuasive but flawed argument by presenting something as generally likely when it is only likely in certain situations.

Best examples for this type of argumentation can be found in the rhetorical declamations of the time, such as Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and the *Palamedes*. These two texts are an excellent example of double argumentation, pro and contra, which were best used in court cases. Such declamations were also excellent exercises for students who learned how to defend any point of view and win the debate if they managed to master argumentation techniques. Gorgias in the *Encomium of Helen* uses argumentation that involves multiple scenarios and possibilities. In order to prove her innocence, he offers multiple justifications, or arguments in her defense. She followed Paris because of a fate determined by the gods, or she was taken by force, so that she is not solely responsible for what happened. This work begins by emphasizing the intention to show the truth, but it is evident that the logos wins by using deception, which shows that persuasion played a key role. Kerferd concludes that: "for Gorgias the sole way in which persuasion operates upon opinion is by deception" (Kerferd 1981, 80).

INFLUENCE ON TODAY'S POLITICAL RHETORIC

It is important to note that sophists were not just manipulators and skeptics, nor were they opportunists, but they used all the possibilities of democracy to act as mediators between theory and practice, developing a radical new democratic discourse called rhetoric (Crick 2010, 41). Sophistic claim that what may be beneficial for some may also bring harm to others expresses a rejection of universally valid moral goods. Mielczarski mentions the hypothesis that the foundations of European pragmatism, utilitarianism, and ethical conventionalism were laid by the sophists, guided by the principle that man is the measure of all things (Mielczarski 2018, 149). This principle is very individualistic, as are modern democratic societies. Sophists evaluated ideas and actions primarily by their effects and usefulness rather than by appeal to absolute truths or natural moral laws This relativistic approach, reinforced by sophists, allowed for the coexistence of different and mutually opposed viewpoints, which was later transferred to modern democratic societies, an aspect best visible in party pluralism. Therefore, the legacy of sophistic thought extends beyond its historical context and can be observed in contemporary political practices, which heavily rely on persuasive discourse.

Even today, politicians use rhetorical methods that were advanced by the sophists, and they remain a significant part of political discourse due to the need to be persuasive to the audience (Roe-Crines 2025, 119). Mielczarski concluded that the twentieth century brought a change in the view of persuasion, which until then was mainly perceived as a skill with a negative connotation, and today it is increasingly studied and used for various purposes (Mielczarski 2018, 152). So there is a tendency to return to the foundations laid by the sophists. Democratic discourse is based more on opinions and beliefs, which are shared by certain political, social, and economic groups (Mielczarski 2018, 160). This renewed interest in the sophistic model of persuasion is not only theoretical, but can be observed in the techniques through which political speech is composed and delivered. Especially in today's digital world where information has never been more accessible, but also highly manipulated the relevance of the sophistic techniques is evident. Political messaging is adapted to the audience in a manner that relies more on narratives that evoke an emotional response, using simple vocabulary, often of a dramatic nature.

Moreover, Isocrates discusses the composition of sophistic speeches in his speech *Against the Sophists*. It is evident that they used commonplaces or model speeches, which functioned as modular components from which an oration could be assembled. The act of composition itself was frequently improvised, with the speaker relying on memorized material, commonplaces, which shows the influence of the manner in which oral poetry is composed through themes and formulae (Kennedy 1963, 53). Modern political rhetoric operates according to a very similar logic. Contemporary politicians rely on using points, slogans, narrative frames, and rehearsed anecdotes that function as rhetorical modules. In debates, interviews, and crisis situations, speeches are often semi-improvised, constructed from prelearned ideological commonplaces rather than truth-based arguments. Like sophists, modern politicians draw on shared themes, like security, freedom, crisis, that audiences already recognize. This continuity shows that political persuasion, ancient and modern alike, privileges performative flexibility and mnemonic repertoires over systematic argumentation or truth claims.

Analyzing the different styles of speech in Thucydides, some authors have established a significant stylistic contribution of the sophists; he mentions three stylistic devices that appeared at the end of the fifth century, which are the careful choice of words, use of neuter forms, and opposites or antitheses. These are elements that are specific to sophists. The emergence of varied forms of antithesis reflects rival approaches to understanding opposition, a central concern in early Greek philosophy. Creative uses of antithesis appear not only in sophistic fragments but also in the surviving fragments and writings of the Presocratics, Isocrates, and Plato (Schiappa 2013, 72). Gorgias's penchant for antitheses can be explained as: "a direct reflection of his belief that truth is relative and requires the clear expression of contrasts and alternatives as the basis of definition and choice" (Kennedy 1963, 65). In democracies, political rhetoric similarly operates through structured oppositions (offering alternatives), using antitheses, as competing actors advance different narratives to frame political reality and form a public opinion. Within this framework, the notion of the "other" emerges as a recurring rhetorical strategy, particularly in the context of East-West political dichotomies, where the East has often been portrayed as inferior by the West. The need for an enemy is one of the most important elements in order to maintain political power.

Moreover, the sophistic stylistic features map quite closely onto dominant patterns in contemporary political rhetoric, especially in media-oriented democracies. First, the *careful choice of words* corresponds to today's emphasis on framing. Modern political actors strategically select terms ("freedom fighter" vs. "terrorist," "reform" vs. "cuts") to shape perception rather than to describe an objective reality. As with the sophistic diction, language functions not so much as a carrier of truth and more as an instrument for producing desired opinion. Second, the use of *neuter or abstract forms* parallels the prevalence of vague, depersonalized concepts. These abstractions allow speakers to avoid precise commitments while still mobilizing affect and consensus, similarly to how sophists did with their speeches. Most importantly, *antithesis and oppositional framing* remain central. Contemporary political discourse thrives on binary oppositions, us/them, progress/decline, freedom/control, which structure choice by dramatizing conflict rather than resolving it. This reflects the same agonistic logic seen in the sophist, which used persuasion to sharply stage alternatives, and not to establish stable truths. Yet these formal and stylistic strategies achieve their full persuasive effect by activating the emotions of the audience.

Kennedy is of the opinion that Gorgias very much recognized the persuasive force of emotion, considering the speaker as a psychagogos, which intoxicates the souls of the audience as if with some kind of incantation. Emotion played a major role in rhetoric, perhaps even a key role, in eliciting different reactions from listeners. Segal states that: "Successful persuasion, in other words, works through the aesthetic process of terpsis and the emotions connected with it" (Segal 1962, 122). This is precisely the true power of sophistic persuasion, because it focuses on emotions, not on reason. Exactly for that reason, it can be concluded that sophistic rhetoric is also a problem for democracy since it is often used in a manipulative way, but it is hard to imagine democratic political rhetoric without it because, in its essence, it is agonistic (hence based on antitheses), since there is more than one actor.

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КРИТИЧКИ ОСВРТ СОФИСТИЧКИХ МОДЕЛА ПЕРСУАЗИЈЕ У ПОГЛЕДУ ЊИХОВА ЗНАЧАЈА И УТИЦАЈА НА САВРЕМЕНУ ПОЛИТИЧКУ РЕТОРИКУ[***]

Резиме

У раду је обрађен преглед софистичких модела персуазије, њихов значај и утицај на каснији развој политичког говорништва. Софисти, који су дјеловали у 5. стољећу прије нове ере, стекли су углавном негативну перцепцију, која се пренијела и до данашњих дана. Они су наметали ставове који су били ослоњени на различита мњења која су имала одређену функцију у политичком контексту, те се стога њихове тактике аргументације не базирају нужно на истини, но то не мора значити да су оне искључиво негативне. Иако постоје различити погледи на улогу и перцепцију софиста, као и на њихове циљеве, несумњиво је да је њихово насљеђе и даље видљиво у реторици. Приказане су технике и приступ, којим су се служили софисти у својим говорима и приликом поучавања. Двије су битне карактеристике софистичке реторике, а то су каиротско и доксастичко увјеравање. Каиротска или временска персуазија се води начелом да је вријеме моћ и од кључног је значаја изрећи нешто у погодном тренутку, притом водећи рачуна да је оно што се говори прикладно, те одговара на тренутне практичне потребе. То упућује на чињеницу да су софистички говори били пажљиво формулирани те су имали своју структуру, као што данас имају и политички говори, поготово они који се одржавају у вријеме

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политичких криза, али и борби за превласт. Агонистички елемент је дио и софистичких говора, у којима се наглашава стратешка конфронтација, вербално натјецање и способност побједе у јавним споровима. Кад је ријеч о доксастичкој персуазији, софистима је истина била флуидни појам, а превагу је имало мњење. Чувена је Протагорина изјава да је човјек мјера свих ствари, што и истини даје индивидуалистички карактер, који је самим тиме и различит. Због тога се и софистичка дупла аргументација, која почива на тези учинити слабији аргумент јачим, уклапа у такво гледиште, које говори да се истој ствари може приступити и *pro* и *contra*. Зато таква аргументација не почива на логици, него на умијећу говорења, те побуђивања емоционалне реакције код публике. Закључно, софистичку реторику не треба схватити као пуку манипулацију, већ као формативни модел демократског увјеравања утемељен на прагматизму, релативности и емоционалности. Дајући предност учинковитости, прилагодљивости и ангажману публике над апсолутном истином, софисти су успоставили обрасце који и даље обликују модерни политички дискурс.

Кључне ријечи: софисти, реторика, персуазија, политичка реторика, Протагора, Горгија, софистичка аргументација

* This manuscript was submitted on January 19, 2026, and accepted by the Editorial Board for publishing on April 1, 2026.